

Anti-Fuller: Transhumanism and the Proactionary Imperative
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Academics suffer from a type of *déformation professionnelle*: we believe that across the long arc of history that ideas get their due. Our efforts are premised on the assumption that the best argument and deepest thinker will eventually be recognized.

Steve Fuller offers an interesting case in point. Few academics are as dedicated to the academic enterprise. His scholarship is prodigious, drawing from a wide range of historical and disciplinary sources. He publishes like crazy. Yet, despite its depth and verve, Fuller's work has not gotten the notice it deserves—the attention, say, lavished on the Latours and Bourdieus of the world. Why? Besides accident, and the lack of a French accent, I see two factors at work.

On Fuller's Rhetoric and Advocacy

First, there is often something not quite right about Fuller's rhetoric. His writing is packed and elliptical, a dense thicket of ideas, citations and allusions that can leave the reader overwhelmed and unsure of what the take-home points actually are. His latest book *The Proactionary Imperative* (2014), written with Veronika Lipinska and that ends with 'The Proactionary Manifesto', is better in this regard.

Second, one must reckon with the harm done by his advocacy of unpopular causes. Fuller has received more than his share of abuse, snarky comments, and dismissals. Serving as a witness for the defense in *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* is part of that, leaving his reputation perhaps permanently damaged in some circles. (I've been warned off linking my name with his, at the cost of not being taken 'seriously'.) But beyond that *cause célèbre* lies his constant tweaking of the verities of intellectual life. He violates the decorum of the academy that, for all its frenetic activity and transgressive talk, is in many ways hidebound and risk adverse. Fuller takes ideas seriously, broadcasts in multiple media, plays the raconteur and public intellectual, and is willing to stake out audacious positions that invite refutation. He does not treat worthies with the respect to which believe they are entitled. He compares Thomas Kuhn to Chance the Gardener of *Being There* (in *Thomas Kuhn: A Philosophical History for Our Times*, 2001), declares the importance of bullshit, and mocks his own clan by distinguishing between academics and intellectuals (in *The Sociology of Intellectual Life*, 2009).

But perhaps there is one final factor is at work. To my knowledge, Fuller has yet to find someone willing to both champion and challenge his ideas. What he needs is an anti-Fuller who highlights what is important in his thinking. Fuller would be well served by a philosophical polemicist who plants a sign athwart his path: 'Beyond this point lies monsters'.

The following remarks are meant as a step in that direction. For I believe Fuller's work is both important *and* wrong-headed.

Transhumanism and the Proactionary Imperative

My focus here is on Fuller's recent work, *Humanity 2.0* (2011) and *The Proactionary Imperative* (2014). These works offer a historically and philosophically literate defense of what has been the largely unacknowledged end of our technological society: self-deification.

Whether one considers economic, political, or technoscientific goals, infinity has been the central trope of modernity. Thus Descartes: if you follow his method "there is no need for the mind to be confined within limits" (Rule I). And Laplace to Napoleon (apocryphally or not): *Je n'avais pas besoin de cette hypothèse-là*. God becomes an unnecessary hypothesis if we gain the powers of a god. Fuller's value lies in making the implications of our modernist (he would say, Scotist) ambitions clear—to pursue technoscientific advance endlessly, even recklessly, in the search for infinite power. In fact, Fuller offers a philosophy of recklessness. Fuller can never say 'enough': this is the most unholy word for the proactionary.

Fuller's work consists of a philosophical defense of infinity via the concept of the proactionary principle. For the few who might have missed it, the term (dating from Max More 2005, <http://www.extropy.org/proactionaryprinciple.htm>) is set in conscious contrast to the precautionary principle: if the latter can be summarized by 'look before you leap', the proactionary principle argues for something more like 'go ahead and leap, we'll deal with the consequences'. In Fuller's hands the proactionary principle is put in the service of, not merely technoscientific advance, but *infinite* advance, which would 'end' only in the infinity of personal deification, aka the possession of godlike powers.

(Perhaps *personal* or *self*-deification is incorrect: the result of the processes that Fuller advocates may well result in the loss of personhood. It may not be individuals who attain god-like powers, but some borg-like or hive mind. As Leon Kass notes, we have here a calculating act of will to bypass one's own will altogether (cf. Briggie 2010). Thus transhumans may be less the authors of their own acts than we poor humans are: have I become like a god, or is it my pharmacist or my software engineer? An ironic result, given that Fuller seeks to extend the very essence of humanity. But we seem to disagree on what constitutes humanity's essence.)

Fuller's ambition is Faustian. The proactionary principle functions in the service of a transhumanism that would result in "restructuring the governance of the planet, if not the universe, to realize species-level ambitions" (2014, 6). These ambitions are to attain extended, if not infinite, life and extended, if not limitless, faculties, whether in an improved version of our current simian form or in another (perhaps silicon) configuration. Nor are these goals limited to *homo sapiens*. Fuller and Lipinska call for 'species uplift', i.e., the enhancement of capacities of animals as well. (What, nothing for the daisies?)

Lacking a crystal ball, the contours of this future are necessarily vague. But what is not vague is Fuller's embrace of convergent technologies to enhance us in any way possible. And his vision is also largely anti-statist. Fuller advocates (announces?) that the

personalization of infinite power should be placed in the hands of individuals. He would “allow consenting adults to engage in risky experiments in their home in the sort of devolved ‘do-it-yourself’ fashion advocated by synthetic biologists” (2014, 124). He calls this libertarian vision ‘protoscience’ a term that plays off of ‘protestant’, where scientific knowledge is appropriated by individuals for their own idiosyncratic ends. He promises more than he delivers in terms of an account of a Welfare State 2.0.

Infinity and Finitude

As an environmentally rooted thinker, I take this argument quite seriously. For me, much of the virtue of his account lies in making explicit the fundamentally anti-ecological assumptions that govern both our economy and our technoscientific complex. His is a philosophy of infinity; in contrast, I see the notion of finitude as central to environmental thinking, and indeed to our physical, moral, and spiritual survival and well-being. With Borgmann (1993), I understand post-modernity (in contrast to the hyper-modernity that Fuller advocates) as a philosophic stance that places care, focal practices, and the recognition of limits at the center of our efforts. Care takes time; focal practices require a degree of calm; whereas Fuller’s worldview prioritizes the frenetic.

Thus, in my recent work (e.g., Frodeman 2014), I define ‘disciplinarity’ not epistemically but rather in terms of the modernist trope of infinity—and a ‘bad’ infinity at that. And I define ‘interdisciplinarity’ in terms of our dawning recognition of the need to pursue sustainability and to recognize limits. If sustainability is about the recognition of limits, it is past time for us to add epistemic limits to the list – to slow down, if not halt some lines of inquiry that threaten our sanity as well as our safety. To the three recognized dimensions of sustainability—economic, social, and ecologic—we need to add a fourth, epistemic sustainability. This will surely require a massive re-orientation of the knowledge enterprise, which is and has been largely *laissez faire* in nature. Knowledge production will continue, of course, as it should; but priorities would be rebalanced, with much greater attention paid to making good use of what we already know (including undiscovered public knowledge, see Swanson) rather than the pell-mell pursuit of more and more new knowledge.

Fuller has a set of categories for such views—old (or new) leftist, environmentalist, or post-humanist (as compared with his own trans-humanist position). But to challenge his thinking requires that we challenge his categories. The precautionary/proactionary axis is procrustean, mangling matters in ways prejudicial to my points. It is not helpful for Fuller to describe things so: “The precautionary wishes to return us to our biological origins ...” (see in Briggie, Fuller, Holbrook and Lipinska 2013, 40).

Instead, the main concern of many of so-called precautionaries is not simply to avoid risk, but to advocate a different conception of the good. Fuller serves as advocate for a lifestyle that is fundamentally distracted in nature, where we flit off to the next ambition before we have had time to understand and fully immerse ourselves in the present one. His is an ethos of continuous frustration, sexual or otherwise.

Fuller's sentiments, then, are deeply anti-Heideggerian. He celebrates the idea of treating the natural world, and ourselves, as a standing reserve. Material and mental existence is to be manipulated in whatever direction our whims dictate. He does not take seriously Heidegger's point that temporality (aka finitude) and meaning are intimately tied to one another. There is no respect for the givenness of things, or any sense that our limitations are fundamental to our being; no appreciation that meaning itself is dependent upon our nature as finite creatures, or that nature derives a degree of normative force from its being an ultimacy that precedes and exceeds human ingenuity. All of existence becomes a plaything.

The warning of Nietzsche's Madman (*The Gay Science*) gains no purchase with Fuller:

“Where has God gone?” he cried. “I will tell you. We have killed him — you and I.” ... “But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea?” ... “Isn't the greatness of this deed too great for us?”

Nietzsche, of course, was not celebrating the end of limits, but raising the question of whether people (other than a few supermen and women) have the resources to live in such a world. That is, Fuller does not take seriously the possibility that it is precisely the Faustian excesses of the 20th and now 21st century technoscience that have spurred the development of reactionary fundamentalisms. Fuller (2014): “the entrepreneurial spirit always needs to renew itself by colonizing new spheres of uncertainty” (34). For many, that uncertainty is literally terrible and terrifying. Neither does Fuller take account of the fact that the vast majority of what passes for ‘progress’ consists of the massive trivialization of human life under an avalanche of stuff, little of it ennobling in nature (cf. the self-described ‘freak’ of ‘lizardman’, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lizardman).

On, and Beyond, Matters of Temperament

As is often the case in philosophy, beneath the arguments the difference between Steve and me largely comes down to matters of temperament. What motivates many contemporary ‘precautionaries’ would better be described as a type of latter day Aristotelianism. Neither exclusively precautionary nor proactionary, what we seek is a renovation of the doctrine of the mean, where it is recognized there can be an excess as well as a deficiency of knowledge. Let us mix daring with a sense of reverence and boundaries, and combine *sapare aude* with a sense that existence is a gift and a concern with becoming the sorcerer's apprentice.

But if Fuller neglects the fact that objections to his views are often rooted in a different philosophy of life that has nothing to do with risk, this is not to say that an evaluation of risk plays no role in those who disagree with him. The degree of his techno-optimism is amazing. Some of us view our current relatively stable situation, culturally, economically, and ecologically, as a matter of great luck, and fear that our luck is likely to run out. To pick one from any number of nightmare scenarios, there are currently some 450 Minuteman missiles spread out across North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and Nebraska. These locations are absurdly under protected (as detailed in “Break-In at Y-12”, a March 9 *New Yorker* piece by Eric Schlosser), so much so that a recent

Plowshares action (consisting of three religious protestors, including an 82 year old woman with a heart condition) was able to easily breach a high-security nuclear-weapons complex. Think what a determined terrorist could do, especially with inside help! Or consider (from any number of scenarios) the consequences if California's drought continues for a few more years. Call each of these low probability events if you like; it is the massive number of them (e.g., the collapse of fisheries, the prospects of a dirty bomb, etc., etc.) that should cause Fuller to rethink his position. For these dangers are the result of prior excessively proactionary behavior on the part of our society.

This point has been made before, for instance by Bill Joy in 2000 ("Why the Future Doesn't Need Us", *Wired*). The fact that we have managed to go some 15 years without a catastrophe is cold comfort for some of us. Once, in conversation with Ray Kurzweil, I asked him about the possible negative consequences of the exponential growth of science and technology. He replied: "any negative consequences will be outweighed 1000 to 1 by the positive consequences." "But what if the 1 consists in our extermination?" His answer was to walk away. I suggest that some of the ingenuity we devote to technoscientific 'progress' should be turned to living a slower, more gentle, and resilient life.

But not Fuller. He and Lipinska declare that "living riskily would amount to an entrepreneurship of the self" (2014, 132). To find this idea repugnant is not the same thing as advocating stasis. 'Enhancements' of various types (e.g., education, improvements in medicine or fitness regimes) should and will be pursued: I certainly do. But please, with a sense of proportion. Now as Aristotle pointed out it is hard to identify the mean when the extremes themselves are difficult to identify. But Fuller's thinking is too binary in setting things up in terms of the either/or of precautionary and proactionary (cf. Holbrook and Briggle 2013).

Fuller's approach to progress strikes me as dangerous because its hubristic nature—which (if I understand him correctly) is precisely what he likes about it. Hubris often leads to its own refutation, although often not before it does a great deal of damage. To repeat by way of summing up: the position I am arguing for here does not strike me as being particularly 'precautionary' in nature. To question infinity is not to call for the end of all progress. It rather suggests that we need to slow down, or at least stop the acceleration, and redefine 'progress' more in terms of having a richer understanding of Keats than in creating and possessing the iPhone 7.

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